The Earth is Eating People

David Mantey, Executive Editor, WDD

I'm not sure if it was the first photos of the "freak geological incident" to surface, or news of the golfer who plummeted deep into an 18-foot cavern that has made it impossible for me to make it through a full night without living through vivid nightmares in which a sinkhole opens up beneath me and the earth pulls me into oblivion. Until now, my lone fear has been kept at bay by avoiding open graves, spelunking, and ice forts – I have to apologize to my niece, I simply didn't trust the structural integrity of the Mantey Ice Mountain in the cul-de-sac.

In the harrowing incident in Florida, a sinkhole opened up underneath a man's bedroom and swallowed him as he slept. His brother heard a crash, followed by his sibling's screams, and nearly lost his own life as he attempted a rescue. First responders lowered equipment into the chasm, but found no sign of life. The man was presumed dead at the bottom of a hole that was nearly 30 feet in diameter at the surface, and opened to 100 feet across below the surface.

Sinkholes are an eerie and unpredictable phenomenon. The day after the incident, you could stand in front of the home and the only sign of incident would be the yellow tape restricting access to the property. Otherwise, the home seemed structurally sound; you would never imagine that the earth had engulfed an entire bedroom the night before.

Further news from Florida sealed the state's fate on my list of states to which I will never travel again, when a regional geologist said that February is the unofficial beginning of "sinkhole season," which kicks off the state's rainy season and typically lasts until the end of summer.

According to Jonathan Arthur, the aforementioned geologist, the wet season combines with man-made factors to exacerbate sinkholes. The acidic rain eats away the limestone and natural caverns that lie under much of the state, causing sinkholes, he says. As an off-and-on pragmatic, what struck me was the cold truth expressed from engineers who assessed the sinkhole. The cause of the Florida

sinkhole is unknown, and engineers are unlikely to ever arrive at a root cause. The earth is eating people and some of our brightest minds are having difficulty assessing why; I suppose that it's a bit premature to ask for a decent warning system. If this was a spoken word performance, this is when I'd pull out the paper bag and hyperventilate in front of the audience. My friends in the crowd would worry when the panic attack caused me to faint, but the local entertainment websites would rave about my "daring performance art piece that challenged male stereotypes."

At the moment, homeowners are responsible for recognizing sinkhole warning signs, such as cracks in the foundation or a shifting floor. As the owner of an old house with a hairline crack under a recent addition and a shifty wooden floor, you can now find me sleeping in the concrete stairwell at the office — please knock if you visit, it's hard to keep the riffraff out.

If I can find a stud in my wall with a $2 sensor, we must be capable of creating an early detection system with an alarm that sounds when the ground is beginning to give, or the foundation starts to slip. If I have an unnecessary radon detector and a smoke alarm that frightens the animals anytime I boil water, a wireless, commercial sinkhole sensor must certainly be feasible. If for any other reason, I need it so I can revert back to my nightmare mainstays: running from the police, stealing from shady Russian students, and psychotic clowns (forget IT; The Last Circus made sure that no local performer's grease-painted face will ever appear at an adolescent function held at my pre-sinkhole abode).

When the sinkhole opened up in Florida, it was far enough from my Madison, WI residence that I could breathe easy (into the paper bag, at least). Just as I eased off the anti-anxiety self-medication, a sinkhole opened up a mere 379 miles away from my pillow and swallowed a golfer on an Illinois fairway. Oddly enough, it wasn't the 13th hole. Apparently sinkholes even fear being too cliché.

The man who fell to the bottom of the 18-foot deep, Illinois pit was lucky enough to survive the fall with only a shoulder injury, but he had to sit through 20 agonizing minutes while the rest of his foursome attempted a rescue. He was fortunate, and his friends were able to hoist him to safety, but it's not a stretch to assume that he'll fear tight quarters for the rest of his life.

Senior geochemist Sam Panno told the Associated Press that Southern Illinois is "riddled with sinkholes," with as many as 15,000 recorded. Sinkholes in this region are formed by acidic rainwater, snowmelt, and carbon dioxide that dissolve the subsurface limestone. Even with this knowledge, the Illinois golf course will not only remain open, but the owners have deemed it "unreasonable and unnecessary" to survey the rest of the grounds for sinkhole threats. Call me a skeptic, but I'd avoid this course when it came up in my summer league.

The earth has upped its ante when it comes to proving that man made alterations to the ecosphere. Instead of disasters that blanket the Eastern Seaboard, Mother Nature is bent on vengeance and targeting individuals.

What's your take? Email david.mantey@advantagemedia.com [1].

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[1] mailto:david.mantey@advantagemedia.com